Fear and Loathing in the Bunker

By Hunter S. Thompson

". . . the milkman left me a note yesterday.
Get out of this town by noon,
You're coming on way too soon
And besides that
we never liked you anyway. . . ."
—John Prine

WOODY CREEK, Col. — Strange epitaph for a strange year and no real point in explaining it either. I haven't had a milkman since I was ten years old. I used to ride around on the route with him back in Louisville. It was one of those open-door, stand-up vans—that you could jump in and out of on the run. He would creep that rancid-smelling truck along the street from house to house while I ran back and forth with the goods.

I was the runner, the mule, and occasionally the bagman when some poor wretch behind on her milk bill had to either pay up or drink water for breakfast that morning.

Those were always unsettling—some half-awake, middle-aged housewife yelling at me in her bathrobe through the screen door. But I was a cold-hearted little bastard in those days. "Sorry ma'am, but my boss out there in the truck says I can't leave these bottles here unless you give me $1.16. . . ."

No argument ever fazed me. I doubt that I even heard the words. I was there to collect, not to listen and I didn't give a hoot in hell if they paid or not; all I really cared about was the adrenalin rush that came with spinning across people's front lawns, jumping hedges, and hitting that slow-rolling truck before it had to stop and wait for me.

There is some kind of heavy connection between that memory and the way I feel right now about this stinking year that just ended. Everybody I talk to seems very excited about it. "God damn, man! it was a fantastic year," they say. "Maybe the most incredible year in our history."

Which is probably true. I remember thinking that way, myself, back on those hot summer mornings when John Dean's face lit my tube day after day . . . incredible. Here was this crafty little ferret going down the pipe right in front of our eyes and taking Richard Nixon with him.

It was almost too good to be true. Richard Milhous Nixon, the main villain of my political consciousness for as long as I can remember, was finally hitting that bullet he's been talking about all those years. That shifty-eyed little monster that not even Goldwater or Eisenhower could tolerate had finally gone too far—and now he was walking the plank, on national TV, six hours a day—with the whole world watching, as it were.

That phrase is permanently etched on some grey rim in the back of my brain. Nobody who was at the corner of Michigan and Balboa on that Wednesday night in August of 1968 will ever forget it.

Richard Nixon is living in the White House today because of what happened that night in Chicago. Hubert Humphrey lost that election by a handful of votes—mine among them—and if I had to do it again I would still vote for Dick Gregory.

If nothing else, I take a certain pride in knowing that I helped spare the nation eight years of President Humphrey — an Administration that would have been equally corrupt and wrongheaded as Richard Nixon's, far more devious, and probably just competent enough to keep the ship of state from sinking until 1976. Then with the boiler about to explode from eight years of blather and neglect, Humphrey's cold war liberals could have fled down the rathlines and left the disaster to whoever inherited it.

Nixon, at least, was blessed with a mixture of arrogance and stupidity that caused him to blow the boilers almost immediately after taking command. By bringing in hundreds of thugs, fixers and fascists to run the Government, he was able to crank almost every problem he touched into a mindbending crisis. About the only disaster he hasn't brought down on us yet is a nuclear war with either Russia or China or both . . . but he still has time, and the odds on his actually doing it are not all that long. But we will get to that point in a moment.

No Questions Asked

For now, we should make every effort to look at the bright side of the Nixon Administration. It has been a failure of such monumental proportions that political apathy is no longer considered fashionable, or even safe, among millions of people who only two years ago thought that anybody who disagreed openly with "the Government" was either paranoid or subversive. Political candidates in 1974, at least, are going to have to deal with an angry, disillusioned electorate that is not likely to settle for flag-waving and pompous bull. The Watergate spectacle was a shock, but the fact of a millionaire President paying less income tax than most construction workers while gasoline costs a dollar in Brooklyn and the threat of mass unemployment by spring tends to personalize Mr. Nixon's failures in a visceral way. Even Senators and Congressmen have been shaken out of their slothful ruts, and the possibility of impeachment is beginning to look very real.

Given all this, it is hard to shed anything but crocodile tears over White House speechwriter Patrick Buchanan's tragic analysis of the Nixon debacle. "It's like Sisyphus," he said. "We rolled the rock all the way up the mountain . . . and it rolled right back down on us."

Well . . . shucks. It makes a man's eyes damp, for sure. But I have a lot of confidence in Pat, and I suspect he won't have much trouble finding other rocks to roll.

I have not read "The Myth of Sisyphus" for a while, but if memory serves there is nothing in that story to indicate that the poor guy ever gave any thought to the real nature or specific gravity of that rock that would eventually roll back on him—which is understandable, perhaps, because when you're locked into that kind of do-or-die gig, you keep pushing and ask questions later.

If any of those six hundred valiant fools who rode in The Charge of the Light Brigade had any doubts about what they were doing, they kept it to themselves. There is no room in Crusades, especially at the command level, for people who ask "Why?" Neither Sisyphus nor the commander of the Light Brigade nor Pat Buchanan had the time or any real inclination to question what they were doing. They were Good Soldiers, True Believers . . . and when the orders came down from above they did what had to be done: Execute.

Which is admirable in a queer kind of way . . . except that Sisyphus got mashed, the Light Brigade slaughtered, and Pat Buchanan will survive in the footnotes of history as a kind of half-mad Davy Crockett on the walls of Nixon's Alamo—a martyr, to the bitter end, to a "flawed" cause and a narrow, atavistic concept of conservative politics that has done more damage to itself and the country in less than six years than its liberal enemies could have done in two or three decades.

When the cold eye of history looks back on Richard Nixon's five years of unrestrained power in the White House, it will show that he had the same effect on conservative/Republican politics as Charles Manson and the Hells Angels had on hippies and flower power. What Richard Nixon was to Manson, the Haldeman-Ehrlichman-Colson bund was to the Angels . . . and the ultimate damage, on both fronts, will prove out to be just about equal.

Or maybe not—at least not on the scale of sheer numbers or people affected. In retrospect, the grisly violence of the Manson/Angels trips affected very few people directly, while the greedy, fascistic incompetence of Richard Nixon's Presidency will leave scars on the minds and lives of a whole generation—his supporters and political allies no less than his opponents.

Maybe that's why the end of th incredible, fantastic years feels hollow. Looking back on the sixtie and even back to the fifties, the fa of President Nixon and everything th has happened to him—and to us—seem so queerly fated and inevitab that it is hard to look back on tho years and see them unfolding in a other way.

The Cheap Dream

One of the strangest things abo these five downhill years of the Nixo Presidency is that despite all the sa age excesses committed by the peop he chose to run the country, no re opposition or realistic alternative Richard Nixon's cheap and mea hearted view of the American Drea has ever developed. It is almost as that sour 1968 election rang dow the curtain on career politicians.

This is the horror of American pol tics today—not that Richard Nixo and his fixers have been cripple convicted, indicted, disgraced and eve jailed — but that the only availab alternatives are not much better; th same dim collection of burned-o hacks who have been fouling our a with their gibberish for the la twenty years.

How long, oh Lord, how long? A how much longer will we have to wa before some high-powered shark wi a fistful of answers will finally brin us face-to-face with the ugly questio that is already so close to the surfac in this country, that sooner or lat even politicians will have to co with it?

Is the democracy worth all th risks and problems that necessaril go with it? Or, would we all be happi by admitting that the whole thing wa a lark from the start and now th it hasn't worked out, to hell with i

That milkman who made me h bagman was no fool. I took my orde from him and it never occurred to m to wonder where his came from. was enough for me to cruise thos elm-lined streets in a big, bright colored van and deliver the goods. Bu I was ten years old then and I didn know much . . . or at least not a much as I know now.

But every once in a while, on humo less nights like these, I think abo how sharp and sure I felt when I wa sprinting across those manicure lawns, jumping the finely-trimme hedges and hitting the running boar of that slow-cruising truck.

If the milkman had given me a pist and told me to put a bullet in th stomach of any slob who haggle about the bill, I would probably hav done that, too. Because the milkma was boss. He drove the truck—an as far as I was concerned he migh as well have been the Pope or th President. On a "need to know" bas the milkman understood

that made. We were both a lot happier just doing what we were told.

George Orwell had a phrase for it. Neither he nor Aldous Huxley had much faith in the future of participatory democracy. Orwell even set a date: 1984—and the most disturbing revelation that emerged from last year's Watergate hearings was not so much the arrogance and criminality of Nixon's henchmen, but the aggressively totalitarian character of his whole Administration. It is ugly to know just how close we came to meeting Orwell's deadline.

Meanwhile, it is tempting to dismiss the ominous fact that Richard Nixon is still the President. The spectre of impeachment lends more and more weight to the probability of his resignation. If I were a gambling person—which I am, whenever possible—I would bet that Nixon will resign for "reasons of health" within the next six months.

It will be a nasty gig when it happens; a maudlin spectacle in prime time on all four TV networks. He will cut the jams in a desperate bid for martyrdom, and then he will fly off, forever, to a life of brooding isolation on one of Robert Abplanalp's private islands in the Bahamas.

There will be poker games on the palm-screened patio with other wealthy exiles like Howard Hughes and Robert Vesco and occasionally Bebe Rebozo . . . and he will spend most of his daylight hours dictating his memoirs in a permanent state of high fever and vengefulness to his faithful secretary and companion, Rose Mary Woods. The only other residents on the island will be Secret Service guards assigned on a six-month rotation basis by Acting President Gerald Ford.

A Battle Plan

That is one scenario, and the odds would seem to favor it. But there are quite a few others—all based on the grim possibility that Richard Nixon might have no intention at all of resigning. He just may have already sketched out a last-ditch, D-Day style battle plan that would turn the tide with one stroke and scuttle any move for impeachment.

Which brings us back to the question of nuclear war, or at least a quick nuclear zap against China, with the full and formal support of our old ally, Russia.

There is a fiendish simplicity in this plan, a Hitleresque logic so awful that I would not even think about printing it unless I were absolutely certain that Nixon was at least a year ahead of me in the plan and all its details. Even now, I suspect, he spends the last half hour of each day keeping it constantly up to date on one of his yellow legal pads.

So here it is—the Final Solution to Almost All Our Problems:

1) A long-term treaty with Russia, arranged by Henry Kissinger, securing Moscow's support of an American invasion, seizure and terminal occupation of all oil-producing countries in the Middle East. This would not end unemployment immediately by pressing all idle and able-bodied males into service for the invasion/occupation forces . . . but it would also crank up the economy to a wartime level and give the Federal Government unlimited "emergency powers."

2) In exchange for Russian support for our violent seizure of all Middle East oil reserves, the United States would agree to support a "pre-emptive nuclear strike" against targets in China, destroying at least 90 per cent of that nation's industrial capacity and reducing the population to a state of chaos, panic and famine for the next hundred years. This would end the Kremlin's worries about China, guarantee peace in Indochina for the foreseeable future, and insure a strong and friendly ally, in Japan, as kingpin of the East.

Comes the Angst

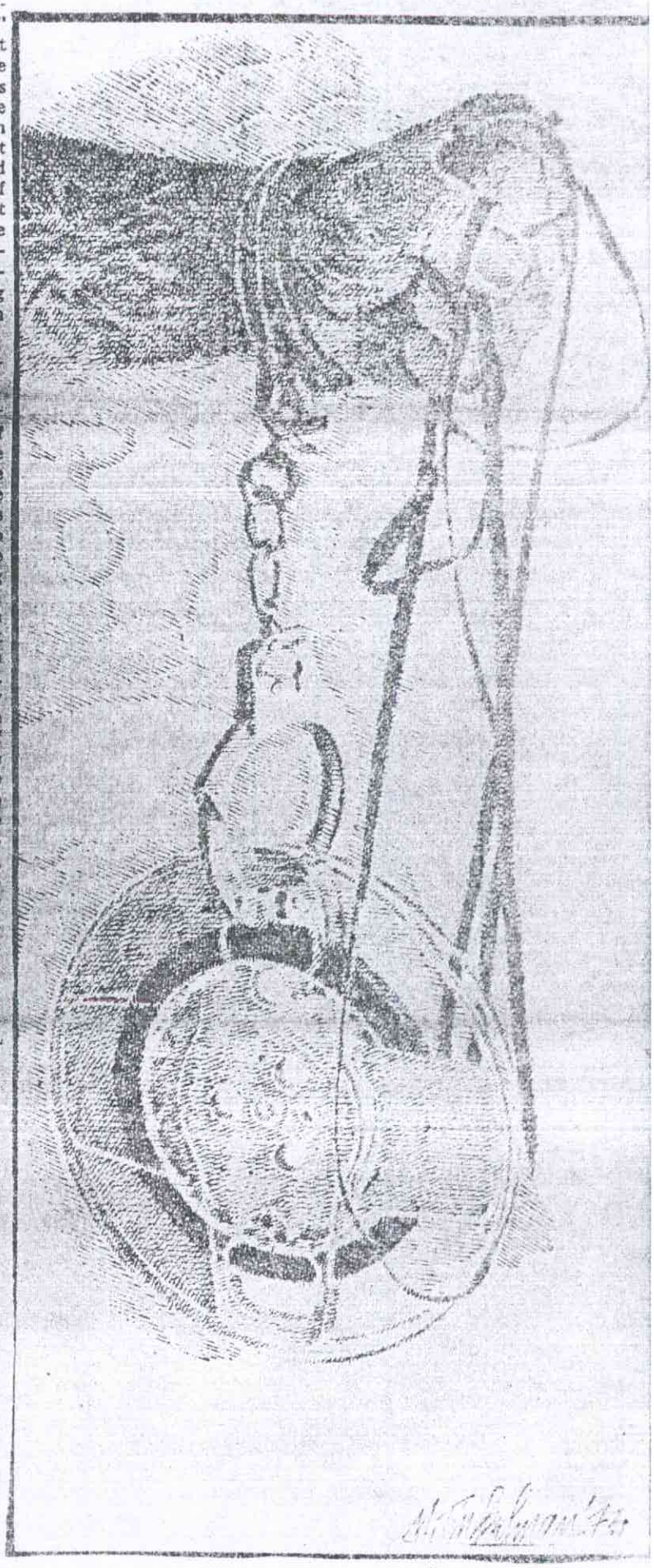
These are merely the highlights of the Final Solution. No doubt there are others, but my time and space are too limited for any long screeds on the subject. The only real question is whether Mr. Nixon is mad enough to run the risk of paralyzing both the Congress and the people by resorting to such drastic measures.

There is no doubt at all, in my own mind, that he is capable of it. But it will not be quite as easy for him now as it would have been last year.

Six months ago I was getting a daily rush out of watching the nightmare unfold. There was a warm sense of poetic justice in seeing "fate" drive these money-changers out of the temple they had worked so hard to steal from its rightful owners. The word "paranoia" was no longer mentioned, except as a joke or by yahoos, in serious conversations about national politics. The truth was turning out to be even worse than my most "paranoid ravings" during that painful 1972 election.

But that high is fading now, falling down to a vague sense of angst. Whatever happens to Richard Nixon now seems almost beside the point. He has been down in his bunker for so long, that even his friends will feel nervous if he tries to re-emerge. All we can really ask of him, at this point, is a semblance of self-restraint until some way can be found to get rid of him gracefully.

This is not a cheerful prospect, for Mr. Nixon or anyone else — but it would be a hell of a lot easier to cope with if we could pick up a glimmer of light at the end of this foul tunnel of a year that only mad dogs and milkmen can claim to have survived without serious brain damage.

Or maybe it's just me. It is ten below zero outside and the snow hasn't stopped for two days. The sun has apparently been sucked into orbit behind the comet Kohoutek. Is this really a new year? Are we bottoming out?

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